

The Spirit of Power

TEXT: "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7).

The final verse of "In Christ Alone" by Stewart Townend strengthens the hope and resolve of the Christian:

No guilt in life, no fear in death,
This is the power of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath.
Jesus commands my destiny.
No power of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
Till He returns or calls me home,
Here in the power of Christ I'll stand.

Dr. Joel Biermann, a professor at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, has written, "When I wake up in the morning I have nothing to do. Christ has done it all for me." These are words that liberate us. There is nothing to do in our standing before God. Christ has won the forgiveness of sins for us! All that we do now is to give thanks for what He has done for us. We are free from guilt! We are free to live in joy! It's as simple as that.

However, the devil, the world, and our flesh have not yet completed their insidious work. These three conspire against us to make us doubt God, and doubt what God wants to do through us.

The apostle Paul's second letter to Timothy was written sometime around the year 68 A.D. It is believed to be the last of the Pauline epistles. In it Paul gives wisdom and encouraging words to his son in the faith, Timothy, reminding him to stand firm in the faith and the sound teaching he has received. It is believed to have been written while Paul was imprisoned in Rome, where Church tradition tells us the apostle would later be executed.

Can you think of a time you felt timid? Can you think of a time you felt afraid?

Instead of standing in the power of Christ, as the above hymn verse suggests, sometimes we feel like shutting up and sitting down. Sometimes Christians feel they cannot witness to their faith because the devil accuses them, convincing them their witness is a sham. Some sin or sins make us feel unworthy to share Christ. Should that stop us? What is the solution to this hesitancy?

Think about Peter? Did he have sin that could have discouraged him from witnessing (see Matthew 26:69-75)?

In spite of his sin, did Peter testify to his faith in Christ (see Acts 2:14-41).

Can you think of other people in the Scriptures who were bold witnesses for Christ in spite of their sins, weaknesses, and shortcomings?

Do you know people today who, having received forgiveness for their sins, freely speak of the joy they have in this forgiveness?

Here are some Bible passages that speak of the power of God:

Acts 1:8

Matthew 28:18-20

Romans 1:16

Isaiah 55:11

Can you think of more passages that describe the power of God in the life of the Christian?

As we look to the past, the redeemed children of God do not carry guilt for their innumerable sins and failures. Christ has paid the penalty for our sins by the sacrifice of His life on the cross. As we look forward we have no fear, because "God works for the good of those who love Him" (Romans 8:28b). Therefore, we need not be afraid; we are in the love of God through Christ. With a clean slate and a bright future, the words of St. Paul ring in our ears that we have a "spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline." God has something for us to do and He gives us the power to accomplish it.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, we praise You for a boundless love that has taken away our sins through the work of Your Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross. Thank you! Now may Your Spirit fill us with all joy and power, so that we overcome our fears and timidity to be faithful, bold, and true disciples in Your Kingdom. We ask this in Jesus' Name. Amen.

The Power to Believe

TEXT: "For by grace you have been saved through faith. This is the gift of God, not of works so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The hymn "In Christ Alone" expresses the saving message of the Gospel.

In Christ alone who took on flesh
Fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness
Scorned by the ones he came to save:
Till on that cross as Jesus died,
The wrath of God was satisfied
For every sin on Him was laid;
Here in the death of Christ I live.

The Gospel message alone has the power to bring faith to lifeless hearts. Luther's "Explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles Creed" begins with a statement that at first may seem rather negative: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him ..." Here Luther is unmistakably clear; we do not have the power to believe. Believing is caused by Holy Spirit; it is entirely Spirit driven. The power to believe comes from God.

There are different opinions about the role people play in their coming to faith. Some say man plays a part in this. Our church teaches that it is God alone who brings us to faith. The real issue, of course, is not what we say, but rather what *God* says in the Bible.

1 Corinthians 12:3
Romans 8:6
John 15:16

How does our human nature react to the fact that we cannot *make a decision* in believing? Why do we want to take some of the credit for our faith?

If we were able to believe by our "own reason or strength," would that mean we are no longer saved purely by God's grace?

While the Bible is clear that we are not able to bring ourselves to faith, it is also clear on how the Holy Spirit works to bring us to faith. It is through the power of the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. The message of Christ giving His life as our Substitute and as the payment for our sins is powerful.

What does Romans 1:16 say about the Gospel?

How does Hebrews 4:12 describe the Word of God?

The Gospel comes to us by proclamation (see Romans 10:14-17). Through hearing the Word, the Holy Spirit creates faith as He pleases.

However, the Gospel also comes to us through the Sacraments. Through Baptism and the Lord's Supper, Jesus connects His Word of forgiveness to an earthly element we can see. The important thing is that through these means, we receive forgiveness of sins.

Nearly every reference to Baptism in the New Testament connects it with the forgiveness of sins.

Acts 2:38-39
Acts 22:16
Romans 6:3-4
Titus 3:5-7
1 Peter 3:21
Mark 16:16

Likewise, the promise of forgiveness is connected to the Lord's Supper as well (see Matthew 26:26-28).

In the same way that the Holy Spirit gives faith through the Gospel, He also sustains our faith. Consider this quote from C.F.W. Walther in his book, *Law and Gospel*:

"God's Word is not rightly divided when the preacher does not in general let the Gospel predominate. This is most important ... It is not enough for you to feel that you are orthodox and able to present the pure teaching. The most subtle form of mingling (Law and Gospel) is when we also preach the Gospel but do not let it predominate. As soon as you fail to do so, your hearers will go hungry and many will starve to death spiritually. You give them too little to eat for the true bread of life is not the Law but the Gospel."

Pastors often receive more compliments on sermons when they focus on the Law.

Why do you think that is?

What challenges your faith in God the most? How have you met that challenge?

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, we thank You for the gift of faith that has been granted to us by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel. We pray You continue to strengthen our faith in You and the message of the cross. When we doubt, we ask that You surround us with the Gospel. Turn us always to the cross – our only hope. Help us to share the Gospel with others who do not yet have faith, so that through it, they may come to believe. In the Name of Christ, we pray. Amen.

The Power to Love

TEXT: And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." (1 Corinthians 13:13)

The first verse of the hymn "In Christ Alone," by Stuart Townend describes the power of love.

In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song;
this Cornerstone, this solid Ground,
firm through the fiercest drought and storm.
What heights of love, what depths of peace,
when fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My Comforter, my All in All,
here in the love of Christ I stand.

Christianity is unique among the major religions of the world with its emphasis on love. The Bible not only describes God as loving, but also declares "God is love!" That is His nature. That is who He is! Allah is never described as love in the Koran.

The heart of the Bible is God's love for us. This love began as God created us. Immediately after the Fall into sin in the Garden of Eden, God promised He would send a Savior that would crush the head of the devil. All through the Old Testament, the promise of the Savior was proclaimed with growing clarity until the Savior took on our flesh as the Babe of Bethlehem. The purpose of His becoming a Man was so that in His flesh He could carry away our sins.

Look at this passage:

"For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in His flesh the Law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in Himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility" (Ephesians 2:14-16).

In Romans, Paul describes the overwhelming fullness of God's love:

"Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by His blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him!" (Romans 5:7-9).

When you consider the hymn above, how does God's love for you bring "heights of love" and "depths of peace"?

How does the love of God still our fears?

How does the love of God make "strivings cease"?

Love is not only the defining attribute of God, it should be the defining quality of Christians.

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:34).

Even though we love Christ and have been transformed by the power of love, our sinful flesh still makes it hard to love others. Jesus continually surprised His disciples and the religious leaders by talking to, ministering to, and loving people who were unlovable in the Jewish culture of that day. Consider the following examples:

John 4:6-14

Matthew 8:1-4

Matthew 8:5-13

Matthew 9:9-13

Who are the “unlovable” people in our culture?

Can you think of someone you have had difficulty loving in your life?

How do we find the power to love others? We remember God’s great love for us in Jesus Christ. It is a transforming love! If we’re honest with ourselves, we know God has forgiven us a debt we could never repay. Once we’re aware of that, we cannot think of ourselves as better than others. Rather, we know we share the same weak human flesh as all mankind. Having been touched by the power of the love of Christ, we are enabled to love others.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, we praise You for Your great compassion. We ask that You help us always ponder Your love – a love beyond our reason and comprehension. We also ask You grant us Your Holy Spirit to overcome the inherent selfishness of our flesh and to truly love others. In Jesus’ Name we pray. Amen.



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The Power of the Breath of Life

TEXT: "Then the Lord God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature" (Genesis 2:7).

The sun was bright and the day warm as mom herded us down to the edge of the water. She found a clear spot on the beach, spread her blanket on the sand, and released us to play in the water with the caution, "Stay close to shore and be sure you can see me."

I proceeded to dive into the waves, each wave picking me up and carrying me further down the beach. I saw a huge wave coming in and timed my jump perfectly. The water came crashing around me and then started pulling me from the shore. I was then hit by a second wave and pushed under the water. I held my breath and tried to touch the bottom so I could push off and reach the surface. There was no bottom!

I was being tossed head over heels and pushed down into a hole. I panicked. My lungs ached for air. I didn't know what to do. I put my hands up.

Suddenly I felt it – a large hand grabbed my wrist and held me tightly. I was being lifted up out of the water. The man held me until I gulped in fresh air. He then carried me to the shore, where I found my Mom sitting on the blanket.

Breathing disorders – such as asthma, emphysema, cystic fibrosis, or COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) – all leave those who have them with the feeling they can't draw breath easily.

As oxygen-breathing creatures, breath is vitally important for us. However, we often take it for granted – until it is threatened, that is. In the same way, the Bible clearly shows a powerful connection between our breath – *our life* – and the Holy Spirit. In fact, the original Hebrew word for "breath" can also be translated as "wind" or "spirit." Our breath, our very being, has its source in the Spirit of God.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light" (Genesis 1:1-3).

Just as God molded and shaped the bodies of Adam and Eve from the ground, He wove our bodies together in our mother's womb. The life we have is a precious gift from God.

What does it mean to you that the life we have is a precious gift from God?

What kinds of activities make you feel alive?

What are some great things you have seen people do with the gift of life God has given them?

What regrets do you have about the way you have used the life God gave you?

Our Lord Jesus Christ hung on the cross as our Substitute, receiving in His body the punishment of God's wrath for all our sins. Actually, death by crucifixion resulted by strangulation; the simple act of breathing – the horrific struggle to take in oxygen and stay alive – became excruciating. The typical cause of death in crucifixion was congestive heart failure. As breathing became constricted, fluids built up in the victim's lungs until the individual was no longer able to draw breath. One of the things that startled the centurion overseeing Jesus' crucifixion was the unnatural way He died.

"Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, 'Father, into Your hands I commit My Spirit!' And having said this He breathed His last" (Luke 23:46).

Jesus' loud voice indicated He still had clear lungs and a strong breath when He died. As Jesus had said before, He laid down His life and no one took it from Him (see John 10:17-18). And on the third day He took up that life and breath again. In fact, when He met His disciples that evening, after giving them His peace, "He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (John 20:22). He gave them His life as their own.

All our life, our energy, our strength, our creativity – in a word, our breath – is a gift from God. But because of sin in this world, our life is a temporary gift. The time will come when the God who created our bodies and breathed His breath into them, will take our breath away, as well as the breath of every living creature on this earth.

“These all look to You, to give them their food in due season. When You give it to them, they gather it up; when You open Your hand, they are filled with good things. When You hide Your face, they are dismayed; when You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When You send forth Your Spirit, they are created, and You renew the face of the ground” (Psalm 104:27-30).

As your body continues to age, what has shown you this life will not last forever?

The removal of our breath in death is only temporary. As Jesus told Martha shortly before He raised her brother Lazarus to life, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die” (John 11:25b-26a).

THE PRAYER: Lord God, we thank You for the life and breath You have given us. For Jesus’ sake forgive us all the times we misuse this body and life. When we face our mortality and coming death, comfort and encourage us by Jesus’ resurrection, which foreshadows our own. We pray this in Jesus’ Name. Amen.



The Power of a Sound Mind

TEXT: "On my bed I remember You; I think of You through the watches of the night. Because You are my help, I sing in the shadow of Your wings" (Psalm 63:6-7).

The day seemed as if would never end. I had jumped from meeting to meeting all day. There was no relief. Everyone wanted to see me; everyone wanted a piece of my time, and I tried to accommodate them all. I knew it would be a long day, but as I sat in my last meeting of the day, I didn't realize how bad it would be.

I watched the clock. I tried taking notes. I concentrated on the speaker. I tried to focus all my energies on staying awake and productive, but I was losing the battle. My mind was wandering. I was thinking about the fishing pole waiting for me after the meeting. As soon as this speaker was finished I could get home. I would be able to sit on the edge of the dock, dangle my feet in the water, cast out my line and *relax*. I could renew my body and mind. It would be glorious.

Finally, the agenda concluded. We said our goodbyes, and I headed for the door. I tried not to rush too fast, but I was on a mission: the river was waiting.

I was no more than a few feet from my car when I heard a small, pitiful voice calling out, "Dad?"

I stopped and listened. I heard it again, "Dad? Daddy!"

The plaintive cry was getting stronger. It sounded like my *son*, but that would have been impossible. My wife said she would take him home from school.

"Dad?" I heard it again. Then it dawned on me. She said she *wouldn't* be able to pick him up after school and that I *should*.

How could I forget my own son? How reliable is your memory?

What things have you learned not to entrust to your memory?

We all have important information we need to recall from time to time, and our memories are not always dependable.

What memory aids help you remember the important things you can't trust to your memory?

You can find all kinds of information storage tools from personal digital assistants to computer calendar organizers, to daily planners, to sticky notes. It is especially helpful when we have all our important information gathered together in one place. Then we can always find the important things we need.

Actually, God had a similar plan for you and me. He knew our memories would fail us. He also knew there would be difficult times in our lives when we needed to remember His promises, but likely would forget them.

Recall a difficult time in your life when God strengthened you and reminded you of His promises through someone or something else beside your own memory.

To help us, God has made available the information we need most so we have it and can share with others. Prior to the birth of Christ, individuals called by God recorded the words of the Old Testament. In a similar way, the message of the New Testament was set down in writing and shared with others. God's grace – and perfect inspiration – were both active in the production of the Old and New Testaments.

Jesus knew perfectly well the limitations of human memory. In fact, the night before He died He still had many important things He wanted His disciples to learn, but they were just not *getting it*. He knew the strain they were under and how their minds were fatigued by the trying circumstances they were enduring. As always, however, He gave them hope *beyond* their circumstances. He told them how He would enable them to remember everything that was necessary. He told them,

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of Truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you" (John 16:12-14).

Earlier in John's Gospel Jesus said, "These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My Name, He will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:25-26).

The Holy Spirit would teach them why Jesus had come to live, die, and rise again. He would remind them of the things Jesus had said, guiding them in truth, and speaking through them – both as they preached and shared the faith with others, and as they recorded it in the words of Holy Scripture.

Guided by the Holy Spirit, the apostles wrote the books of the New Testament. These sacred writings have taught Christians throughout the centuries how to grow strong in their faith. Through these texts, God shares the important things Jesus taught us – just as Paul reminded his young friend, Timothy:

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you received it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:14-17).

How does your knowledge of God's promises in Scripture equip you for dealing with situations with your family, friends, and co-workers?

How have you been able to use God's Word to teach, reprove, correct, or train someone else?

What tips or strategies have you learned to help you remember and share God's Word with others?

THE PRAYER: Holy Father, thank You for sending Your Holy Spirit to work faith in us and to unite and guard us in that faith. Thank You for reminding us and our brothers and sisters in Christ of Your reassuring promises as given in the Holy Scriptures. Empower each of us to go out and share Your promises with all Your children and, especially, with those who still do not know You. We pray in Jesus' holy Name. Amen.

The Power of Hospitality

TEXT: "There was an estate nearby that belonged to Publius, the chief official of the island. He welcomed us to his home and for three days entertained us hospitably" (Acts 28:7).

There is power in showing hospitality. For us today, the meaning of this word has been reduced significantly from its biblical significance. In ancient times hospitality meant more than simply welcoming and being friendly to acquaintances. It meant that a family would take a complete stranger into their home – not only for a meal but to give him a place to lodge, allowing him to stay even a few days, if necessary. Showing hospitality even meant providing protection to one's guests.

Showing this sort of hospitality was taught in the Old Testament (see Leviticus 19:33-34). It was also practiced in the New Testament (see Romans 12:13).

Consider the following examples:

Genesis 18:1-18

Abraham and the angels: Notice that Abraham provided food and welcome for the strangers.

Genesis 19:1-11

Lot and the angels: The same angels, one whom Abraham addresses as "Lord," then go to Sodom. Lot sees them intending to sleep in the town square, but he insists they lodge at his home and spend the night. In addition to supplying a feast (verse 3), Lot also wants to protect them from the men of the city who intend to rape them. He seeks their safety by getting them to stay at his home, then by blocking the men of the city outside at the door (verses 6-7), and finally by the seemingly unconscionable act of offering his daughters instead (verse 8).

Luke 16:19-31

The rich man and Lazarus: The fact that Lazarus was "laid at the gate" of the rich man (verse 20) probably indicates the rich man had the responsibility of showing hospitality to the beggar. Since the rich man gave him but crumbs, this is used as evidence of the justice of the rich man's punishment "in torment in Hades" (verse 23).

To whom does God want us to show hospitality (see Luke 14:12-14)? Who do we usually invite to our feasts? Do you know of people who invite strangers in for such events?

What prevents us from showing hospitality?

Our security is an obvious concern? Is there a way we can safely show hospitality to strangers?

Hospitality is an expression of love, which is part of the very fiber of a Christian. Notice the connection between love and showing hospitality in Hebrews 13:1-3.

Do you think this passage refers to Abraham and Lot entertaining angels unaware?

How do you think showing hospitality relates to evangelism?

How do you show hospitality at your church? How do you show hospitality in your home?

Is the way you show hospitality to a fellow believer different than the way you show it to someone you don't know?

Look at the example of Publius showing hospitality to Paul and his fellow travelers following the shipwreck on Malta described in Acts 28:7-10. Publius was not even a believer at this point, but he brought them into his home. The exciting result of this generous act of hospitality was that many people were healed and that the Name of Christ was glorified.

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You have showered us with gifts of food, home, and comfort. We ask that You give us the courage to show hospitality to both friend and stranger alike. Lead us to share what we have with others. May our simple kindnesses point to the greatest act of kindness ever shown: the sending of Your Son Jesus Christ to be the Savior of the World. In Jesus Name. Amen.

The Power to Show Mercy

TEXT: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me" (Psalm 51:1-3).

School was out for the summer and I had three months until I had to face the sixth grade. I rode my bicycle to Skip's house for a day of fun and adventure. When Skip's Dad offered to take us along with him to Chicago to deliver beer to bars, we were in guy heaven!

There was one drawback: he wanted me to call my Mom and get her permission. I called, she said, "No."

Skip's Dad asked, "What did she say?"

"Have fun," I responded.

And fun I had, we drove in a beer truck, had burgers and came home in time for supper. Mom asked about my day, and I told her how I had fun with Skip.

That night I couldn't sleep. I had lied and willfully disobeyed my mom. I got out of bed and tearfully confessed my lies to my Mom.

She smiled at me and said, "I know all about it. You are forgiven. I love you. Did you learn a lesson?"

That was mercy.

"Jesus continued: 'There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So he divided his property between them.

"Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.

"When he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired men.' So he got up and went to his father.

"But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.

"The son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son,'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate" (Luke 15:11-24).

How many times have you heard this parable and thought the son that left home *shouldn't* have been rewarded, and he certainly *shouldn't* have been restored as a son?

We would probably have plenty of support for that position; after all, the son treated his father as if he had already passed away, asking for his inheritance. The son squandered all his money on poor choices. Nobody forced him to throw parties or live the wild life. Selfishly indulging his desires and coming to ruin, we figure he got what he deserved. After all, shouldn't there be penalties for poor choices?

Yet, the father showed mercy on his son, restoring him to his family position, giving him gifts he didn't deserve.

Can you remember a time when you received mercy?

"Meanwhile, the older son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing. So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on. 'Your brother has come,' he replied, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound.'

"The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, 'Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!'

"'My son,' the father said, 'you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found'" (Luke 15:25-32).

How many times are we like the older son, seething because we see scoundrels receiving gifts and treatment they do not deserve? We can relate to the older son for he stayed home, attending to his familial duty, taking care of his father, and the family's estate. Then along comes his wicked brother, getting all that mercy! At least the father should have housed the returning brother in the servant's quarters, not in the house.

Can you remember a time when you resented someone who received mercy?

"As Jesus went on from there, he saw a man named Matthew sitting at the tax collector's booth. 'Follow Me,' He told him, and Matthew got up and followed Him. While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" came and ate with Him and His disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked His disciples, 'Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and "sinners"?' On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners'" (Matthew 9:9-12).

The Pharisees judged by their laws; Jesus judged by His mercy.

Jesus desires us to show mercy as well.

Is it easier to show mercy to those we know and love than to those who are different from us?

Is it easier to offer mercy to someone who finds himself in a hard situation through no fault of his own than to someone who caused his predicament?

How many times a day do we receive God's mercy?

Does God give mercy based on our own righteousness?

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You open Your hands and give us all we need for this life. Thank You. You also give us mercy, giving us not what we deserve, but that which we do not. Thank You. Through the gift of Christ, You have given us eternal life, not by our works, but by His. Give us the eyes to see those who need mercy and the strength to act. In Your Name we pray. Amen.

The Power to Give

TEXT: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

"Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask Him! So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:7-12).

The boy was excited to share the big news: he had been chosen to represent his high school and his state at the young leaders' conference in Washington D.C. It was a high honor, but it came with a price. He would be responsible for paying his own travel expenses. Being the child of two Lutheran school teachers, *any* expense would be too much, let alone the estimated price tag for a week in D.C.

He tried to hide his disappointment when his parents shared the concern about cost. Grandpa was consulted. Grandpa was excited for his grandson but couldn't fund the entire trip. He did offer to send his grandson a gold coin, however. It was something Grandpa held on to for his own retirement. The coin could be sold for more than half of the estimated cost of the trip. Grandpa sent the coin.

Mom and Dad got together and ran their own calculations. Mom emptied her "rainy day emergency fund," and Dad cashed in all his coins. With some creative financing and some imaginative meal planning, the joyful news was shared: you can go to Washington D.C.! Smiles, shouts of joy, and good feelings, however, gave way to a sense of frustration when a letter arrived shortly thereafter stating the dress code requirements: ties and jackets must be worn at all times. That meant a collared shirt. Fortunately, the boy's other Grandpa heard of the predicament and knew he could help. Soon a package arrived containing three of his old suits, along with matching shirts and ties. Grandma was able to tailor the suits to fit and reflect the latest style.

The boy smiled, Mom and Dad held back the tears as he boarded the bus for Washington D.C.

That was giving.

For parents giving starts the day their first child is born. When they hear their baby's first cry, they drop everything in order to provide what the child needs: food, comfort, a changing, digestive relief, or just their company. From that first cry forward, parents bend over backwards to give to their child. Parents will sacrifice, save, and do most everything in their power to meet not only their children's *needs* - but most of their *wants*.

Can you remember a time when you really wanted something and your parents had to sacrifice to provide it?

Can you remember a time when you really wanted something and your parents were not able to provide it - or even refused it?

As you look back, what had the most effect on your life - that which was desired and received, or that which was desired and not provided?

Is there a time when the best gift to give your child is *not* to give them what they ask for?

What are the gifts your Heavenly Father gives you?

How does His gift of eternal life help us as we give away that which is entrusted to us?

"And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will" (2 Corinthians 8:1-5).

Can you think of a person who continues to give, even when it appears there is nothing left to give?

Are there times in your life when you were able to give, even when it appeared there was nothing to give?

"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father; take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was sick and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me.'

"Then the righteous will answer Him, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You something to drink? When did we see You a stranger and invite You in, or needing clothes and clothe You? When did we see You sick or in prison and go to visit You?'

"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did for Me'" (Matthew 25:34-40).

This parable speaks to the gifts we give. These gifts are not always money, but can be food, drink, a welcoming attitude, clothes, taking time to visit, acceptance, and the like.

Which is easier to give to: friends, family, church, or strangers?

Sometimes we give things but withhold our heart. Is it important the gift we give is "from the heart"?

God gives to us daily. He gives us all we need for life and so much more. He even gives us the best gift of all: eternal life in His presence.

Can we ever out-give God? Even when it appears He has taken away all that we need, does He still give us gifts?

Is it possible we are the ones God uses to provide for others?

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You open Your hands and freely give us all we need for this life. Thank You. You also give us food, clothing, home, friends, family, and not only what we need for life, but most of what we want. Thank You. Through the gift of Your Son, our Redeemer, You have given us eternal life - not by our works, but by His. For this love, we praise You. Heavenly Father, thank You for making us stewards of Your good gifts. Help us always to see how we can best use them for Your glory. Help us discern when it's best for us to give away to others what You have given us - and make us ready to do so. In Your Name we pray. Amen.

The Power to Pray

TEXT: "And call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor Me" (Psalm 50:15).

The nurse entered the room with the medication that would bring relief from the excruciating pain. The cancer had spread to her bones, her liver, and now it was attacking her entire body. The painkillers were not working. We held hands, saying, "I love you," with our words and touch. I kissed her and stepped aside as the nurse gave her the medication that would provide sedation – relief from the unimagineable pain.

For two more days her hospital room was filled with people: our children, our granddaughter, our brothers and sisters, their spouses, nieces and nephews, friends and co-workers. While the medication gave her blessed relief from pain, at the same time it prevented her from enjoying the company of those who visited her.

Then the time came.

I was called back to her room from my walk around the halls. The room was deathly still when I entered. Family stepped aside allowing me to sit by my wife. I took her hand just as she took her last earthly breath. Time stopped. Her hand became cold. My wife of 35 years was being welcomed into eternity, and I sat by her bedside.

I opened my mouth, "Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done ..."
I choked. I faltered. I stopped.

A hand rested on my shoulder as I heard, "... on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and ..."

Together, we spoke, "... forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil ..."

And everyone in the room joined in, "... For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever."

I whispered, "Amen."

That was the power to pray.

We have the incredible gift of being able to speak directly to God. Often, however, we take this gift completely for granted, neglecting to use it. Sometimes we are so awed by the fact that we can talk to God we only pray when something really important is on the line.

Have there been times in your life when you felt you weren't able to talk to God, that your prayers were too trivial to bother Him with?

What about deliverance? God promises to deliver you if you call upon Him in the day of trouble. Have there been times when you called out to God in the day of trouble and yet the trouble still came?

Has there been a time when you called upon God in the day of trouble and the trouble still came ... but when all was said and done, it actually worked out well for you?

Does God always deliver us from trouble the way we think we should be delivered?

"Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

We have the power to pray continually. That is an awesome thing. We can call upon God all the time – in every circumstance – and He listens.

How is it possible to pray continually?

Can you think of a time when you called on God for His deliverance, protection, or guidance without thinking? Is that something we develop through an attitude of praying continually?

Do all of our prayers need to be spoken?

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

"This, then, is how you should pray:

'Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be Your Name,
Your Kingdom come,
Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.'

For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6:8-14).

Jesus taught His disciples to pray. Jesus teaches us to pray, also.

What does it mean to *speak* the Lord's Prayer, to *recite* the Lord's Prayer, and to *pray* the Lord's Prayer?

Can you think of a time when you spoke, recited, or prayed the Lord's Prayer? Does how we verbalize the Lord's Prayer make a difference in how God hears it?

Jesus warns us not to pray to show or to impress others with our vocabulary. He tells us that God already knows what we need before we even ask for it.

Can you remember a time when God provided for you even before you knew you needed it?

Should we stop praying since God already knows what we need?

"In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express" (Romans 8:26).

It is a comfort to know that when we do not know what we are to pray for the Holy Spirit steps in and intercedes for us.

Have there been times in your life when you just didn't know what to pray for – no matter how you reasoned it?

How is it a comfort to know the Holy Spirit intercedes for you?

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You command us to pray. You invite us to pray. You teach us to pray. Thank You for the power to pray. Help us always to pray – without ceasing. Give us the ability to see Your will is done – not ours. In Your Name we pray. Amen.

The Power to Encourage

TEXT: "An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up" (Proverbs 12:25).

After the Friday game was over, coach called me aside and said, "You're pitching next Monday."

Those four words ruined my whole weekend. I was a third baseman, not a pitcher. All weekend I practiced the windup, the delivery, and the sound of the umpire calling out, "Strike three!"

My brothers got tired of playing catcher. My friends got tired of playing catch. Dad tried for a while. I started throwing balls into the fence. I was determined to be prepared come Monday.

The sky was clear and the winds were warm on Monday. I arrived at the ballpark early to get in some last-minute practice. Mom and Dad sat in the stands just as I ran to the mound.

"Strike one!" the umpire bellowed. My first pitch was in the zone; it was going to be a good day. That good feeling lasted up to the third inning – until I walked the bases full. The fourth batter hit a slow grounder to me. I still remember that moment; I fielded the ball to my right and spun around. In a flash I thought, throw to first, one out. Throw it home and keep them from scoring. An instant later, I visualized my perfect throw home.

I wheeled around and fired a blazer – completely over the backstop, across the parking lot, and down the street. My pitching career came crashing to a halt as I was called from the field. I sat on the bench for the rest of the game. I was devastated. I literally threw the game away in front of Mom and Dad, my friends, and my neighbors.

I walked over to my bike, and Dad was standing next to it. "Let's go home," he said, and smiled. The journey was made easier with an ice cream cone that lifted my spirits. I may never be a pitcher, but I was a really good third baseman. That was encouragement.

Consider these words from Ecclesiastes 4:8-12:

"There was a man all alone;
he had neither son nor brother.
There was no end to his toil,
yet his eyes were not content with his wealth.
'For whom am I toiling,' he asked,
'and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?'
This too is meaningless—
a miserable business!

Two are better than one,
because they have a good return for their work:

If one falls down,
his friend can help him up.
But pity the man who falls
and has no one to help him up!

Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm.
But how can one keep warm alone?

Though one may be overpowered,
two can defend themselves.
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. "

A good friend is a blessing. Someone to share the load is a blessing. Someone to encourage is a blessing.

How have you been encouraged by a good friend?

How have you encouraged someone?

"On His arrival, Jesus found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and many Jews had come to Martha and Mary to comfort them in the loss of their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went out to meet Him, but Mary stayed at home" (John 11:17-20).

When Lazarus died, many friends came to comfort Martha and Mary.

How do the traditions of bringing meals, sending sympathy cards, and visiting those who grieve encourage those saddened by a loved one's death?

How can these same traditions be used for those facing trials other than death?

"When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' He asked. 'Come and see, Lord,' they replied. Jesus wept" (John 11:33-35).

How can simply being available and weeping with someone be an encouragement?

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

When we join a congregation, we are surrounded by those who need encouragement and those who encourage us.

Can you share a time when you attended a worship service and it gave you encouragement?

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You surround us with encouragers. Help us to be an encourager to others. Give us the words You would have us speak and the deeds You would have us do – to support, build up, and be Your witnesses. In Your Name, we pray. Amen.



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The Power to Suffer Persecution

TEXT: "Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On My account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

"Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of Me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes" (Matthew 10:17-23).

We were in the back of the church, teaching the Catechism when he knocked on the door. He wanted to ask us questions. We took him to the front of the church and started answering his questions. Soon he asked, "Where do you believe you will be after you die?"

We rejoiced for here was the opening we needed to share Christ with him. "Heaven," we responded.

"I will put you in heaven tonight," he said with a cocky grin. "Just look in my backpack."

We looked; he could certainly carry out his threat if he wanted to. "Why?" we asked. We had to know.

"Because you are taking away our religion, our way of life. You Christians think you have the only answers. Well, we will see." And with that he was gone.

We asked our students: "Do we take him seriously?"

"Yes, he just got out of jail. He killed someone."

That was when we suffered persecution.

Those are chilling words in the text above: "When you are persecuted ..." Jesus doesn't tell us "*if* you are persecuted," He tells us "*when* you are persecuted ..."

Persecution can take many forms: insults and cutting remarks, mocking, ridicule, loss of job, violence, slander, and more.

Have there been times you felt persecution? If so, how?

Even if you haven't been persecuted, are there Christians in today's world who are persecuted for their faith?

In the passage above Christ gives us comfort when He tells us, "But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

How many times have you heard yourself talking and then thought, Wow! Where did that come from?

"Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom He has given us" (Romans 5:3-5).

How can it be that suffering for Christ is a good thing?

“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matthew 10:28).

How does knowing there is nothing that can separate us from Christ comfort us when persecution occurs?

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, when we suffer alienation and persecution on account of our faith, please strengthen our hearts and revive our spirits. When we are persecuted for You, give us Your peace. When our brothers and sisters are suffering for You, let us stand with them, boldly encouraging them and proclaiming Your mercy to the nations. Thank You for the hope You give us and the courage to share Your Good News with others – even those who would harm us. In Your mighty Name we pray. Amen.

The Power of Eternal Life

TEXT: "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In My Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going" (John 14:1-4).

The tour guide finished his speech, "We will never know the exact place of our Lord's burial, but as far as historians can determine, this is the recognized site."

The line in front of the ornate tomb inside the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem inched forward as only a handful of tourists were admitted into the tomb.

I bowed as I walked through the doorway into the inner chamber and knelt in front of the slab that tradition says was the rock on which our Lord was placed. My mind raced backward to all the gravesides I had ever stood at – my grandparents, parents, family members, friends, fellow church members, and classmates – and I felt sorrow.

Then I looked up and I was alone in the tomb; no other person had been allowed to enter. A chill shot down my spine as I read the words on the banner draped over the cold stone, "Christos Anesti" – Christ is Risen!

Then I felt a peace. This tomb was empty; our Lord defeated death! The tombs of all those I remembered are also empty, containing only their physical bodies. Their spirits – their souls – are walking with Christ. He defeated the grave – for them – for me – for all believers! Yes, Christ is Risen! Hallelujah!

That is the power of eternal life.

Our place in heaven is already prepared; there is nothing we can do to earn eternal life. It is a gift freely given.

To express a fear of death is the typical human reaction. Why do we not have to fear death?

How can knowing that our place in heaven is not dependent on what we do influence how we live our life on this earth?

"Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me" (Philippians 1:18b-26).

Paul is ready to depart this earth, yet he is also content to stay. He reasons that if he presses on in this world he will continue to share Christ and encourage believers through his ministry. However, if he dies he will live with Christ eternally.

How can this conviction give us the power to face illness, persecution, suffering, or other trials?

What would be harder – to die for Christ or to live for Christ?

"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were therefore buried with Him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

"If we have been united with Him like this in His death, we will certainly also be united with Him in His resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with Him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin" (Romans 6:1-7).

Our eternal life is made possible by Christ's death and resurrection. By God's grace, baptismal waters drown the sinful person and now we have the power of eternal life.

As long as we live on this earth we will be tempted by the world, the devil, and our old sinful nature. Why do we not have to fear these temptations?

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away'" (Revelation 21:1-4).

In these words written by John, we are given a glimpse of what eternal life will be like for the Christian. These days, society is fascinated by the concept of eternity. In fact, whole industries and modes of thought have been dedicated to it: books, movies, plays, Web sites, religious movements ... you name it, there's somebody's thinking about it.

How important is it that we know and understand every detail of our eternal life?

What comfort and hope do you take from the glimpse we see in God's revelation?

How can we live so that others will see this comfort and hope?

THE PRAYER: Heavenly Father, You have given us The Word of eternal life. Thank You. Please give us the power to share this Word with our family, our friends, our neighborhood, and all whom we meet. We ask for Your strength to live for You or to die for You. Not our will, Lord, but Yours be done. In Your Name we pray. Amen.